DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 026 359 TE 000 915

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Learning From Loneliness.

Pub Date Mar 67
Note-4p.
Journal Cit-The Teachers Guide to Media & Methods; v3 n7 p10-13 Mar 1967
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.30
Descriptors-Audiovisual Communication, Discussion (Teaching Technique), *English Instruction, Films, *Film Study, *Literary Analysis, Literary Conventions, Literary Criticism, Literary Discrimination, Literature, Mass Media, *Novels, Secondary Education, Teaching Methods, *Twentieth Century Literature
Identifiers-Allan Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner

Allan Sillitoe's "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner" and the movie version of that novel capture the imagination of students because of the stature of the hero, Colin Smith. He refuses to "play it cool" or to "cop out"; he loses his race and wins his manhood. To the students, he carries the command to hold on fiercely to a shred of dignity. Educational use of this story may give the students a pleasurable experience with reading, an introduction to a well-made film, and the increased understanding derived from a well-planned discussion of the content and form of both the movie and the novel. (Suggested questions for discussion are included.) (JS)

ED 026359

THE TEACHERS GUIDE TO media & methods

An Expansion of SCHOOL PAPERBACK JOURNAL

March, 1967 Vol. 3, No. 7

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THIS MONTH'S COVER

The stuff heroes are made of, Sean Connery's James Bond pauses unperturbed in this sequence-still from United Artist's **Goldfinger.** More Bond, page 18.

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The Teachers Guide to MEDIA & METHODS (formerly SCHOOL PAPERBACK JOURNAL) is published nine times per year September through May by Media & Methods Institute, Inc., 124 East 40 Street, New York, N. Y. 10016. Phone: 212 MU 7-8458. Subscription: $3 per year, $4 in Canada. $2 each for 20 or more to one school address. Single copy 40¢.

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Printed in U.S.A. by World Color Press. Controlled circulation postage paid at Sparta, Illinois.

West Coast Advertising: J E Publishers' Representative Co. 8380 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles, California; 420 Market St., San Francisco, California.

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Learning From LONELINESS

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by Robert Geller

THERE ARE FEW BOOKS in any English curriculum which can have as broad and as lasting appeal for students as does Allan Sillitoe's *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, a story about a gritty hero named Colin Smith. Such a pronouncement runs its own risky course of sounding like just another ed biz sprint. But *Loneliness* has captured the mind and the imagination of an incredibly large part of our student body, and faculty, in just months. It is the one text so far which can be read with wondrous delight, then viewed as a marvelous movie, then accepted as stimulating entertainment in either medium, and most important of all, discussed with uninhibited zeal and personal commitment by large groups of students who have a wide range of academic talents and aspirations.

The reasons for its popularity and appeal give hope that there can be many more contemporary books and film adaptations for classroom use. What makes *Loneliness* particularly outstanding, though, is the stance and stature of its hero. Colin is no angry rebel without a cause. He is no milching Holden Caulfield with a quixotic quest to wipe clean the dirty words from the white tiles; he is no guilt-ridden prep school pubescent returning to Devon to purge himself of crimes of omission and commission. Colin is a tough-minded scoundrel gasping for breath, holding on to a tenuous life and a tentative honor. He refuses to play it cool, to cop out; he rages against a world of stuffy do-gooders and pandering hypocrites. He loses his race and wins his manhood. He gives us a clear, finite action which sums up all the complex cant about the existentialistic modern.

For those teen-agers who must wage battles and win wars each and every day of their lives in order to get to the right schools and meet the right people and fight the most righteous struggles, getting prepped to grab at status and treasure, Colin's voice is a bothersome echo; but it is a damned strident echo and it cannot be forgotten. All of us are faced at least once in our lives with the choice of winning or losing. And for the drop-outs—or worse, the pitiful lingerers-on—Colin's spunky defiance is more than a call to arms. It is a command to hold on fiercely to a shred of dignity.

In the past many of our students had read *Loneliness* on their own and had pleaded a good case for giving all high schoolers the chance to read it carefully. In addition, many students had seen the movie adaptation, in between some brutal snipping for the TV commercials; they endorsed its power despite these insensitive interruptions. Their enthusiasm gave us confidence and we planned for both the story and the movie as a commonly-shared experience for over 600 students.

The movie was shown on a brisk fall day, and all the horrible AV mishaps, which traditionalists secretly long for, went wrong. Such happenings. Fuses blew, sound tracks gargled, jet planes rattled the windows. But the film spun right on, and the students laughed and winced in all the right places, and the artistry and deft skill of director Tony Richardson had them inched forward on their seats during the last ten minutes when Colin stands with hands on hips, head thrown back to the heavens, only yards from the finish line. I know hundreds of fingers were crossed and countless secret prayers were made for Colin not to sell out, because so many in the audience already had.

When the movie was over I received many thanks for being the kindly impresario, thank you's from several students who really have had so little to be thankful for in their ten years of schooling.

Robert Geller is English Department Chairman of Mamaroneck High School, New York.

"LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER" - CONTINENTAL 16

BOOK FIRST

Perhaps some purists among film-lovers will ask why we had to go and spoil the movie by making kids read the book first. I think there is good reason for this ploy. I have not yet surrendered to the dictum that the printed word is dead, and I'm fighting gallantly these days with considerable energy to make reading palatable. If the showing of *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* was a deceitful ruse to get kids back to books, I am without shame because I acted with the hope that Sillitoe could then find some more readers with whom to share his gift, and with the hope that the kids who might have gone right on abhorring reading might at last uncover a single pleasure.

We were well prepared for this experiment. Weeks before the movie was shown we met as an English faculty for some interesting give and take. Out of these discussions came a clearer awareness of Colin's applicability to each and every one of us; we also wrote a guideline which could help in classroom follow-ups. Parts of that guideline follow:

> . . . Perhaps there are three approaches to the experiment we are attempting. We can carefully consider the major thematic consideration: why "the honorable ones" quit when the race is theirs. Our students might respond individually in panels to the heroic and tough decision made by the runner. They might try to clarify the "out-law" and "in-law" business, whether phoniness is essential to the role of the headmasters. They might consider the punishing matrix of a society caught up in a maddening dash for the buck. Should we want students to defend and define all of the glib, but essentially valid attacks made by the runner and by the author Sillitoe?
>
> Actually, if the runner had won the race, had played the game just a little, could he not have gained power and freedom to make the world a better place for himself and for fellows like himself? (Consider then "Trees that bend with the wind save the last twigs." No/yes?)

A consideration of the aesthetic of the film itself (its tropes and its devices) is reason enough to view the movie with an entire class. A class which for the most part may be exposed to no more than "Girl from Uncle" and "Murray the K." We can examine just how the film handles time, flashback, line of action, the opening and closing of the universe; the way the camera moves in and out of the runner's mind (with masterful cutting and editing from the outdoors to the grimy flat to the expanse of the beach); the way it uses stark, brainy black and white—all of these possibilities to get kids to really see a film and its devices at work, devices "bombarding" many of them while they sat passively munching popcorn, unknowing.

Finally, for those unyielding traditionalists who actually believe that the printed word is not an anachronism, who protest and are roseate enough in mind to declare that 50 years from now people will still hunger to read and vicariously suffer through the heritage of a Western world, there is the legitimate and purposely simplified approach which compares Sillitoe's story with the film, with no at-

tempt to have anyone choose sides. It is sufficient to understand that there are fine things good fiction can do if it uses its devices well, and there are wondrous things good movies can do if they use their tropes with imagination and perceptiveness.

A GUIDE FOR FILM AND BOOK

The Film *(rental: Continental 16, 241 East 34 St., New York, N. Y. 10016)*

A. *Narration.* How close do we get to the protagonist Colin? How much do we see through his eyes? How is the camera used to move inside Colin? When does it move outside his viewpoint? Why and how does this happen?

B. *Plotting.* What is the line of action? How are flashbacks introduced? What strategy is apparent in the use of the past? At what key moments in the present do flashbacks of the past intrude? How natural and smooth are these transitions? Visually what happens with the camera to make past and present almost simultaneous? (Note the impossibility of fusing past and present in the written form. Why?)

C. *Settings.* What scenes are most vivid for you? Why do they stay with you? Why are contrasting scenes edited to juxtapose in the film? (Grimy flat and expanse of the beach; freedom of outdoors and suffocating interior of the flat.)

D. *Use of secondary characters.* What is the function of secondary characters such as Colin's mom and her dandy man, Colin's girl friend, his dad, the policeman, the psychologist, his accomplice and pal, his running rival at the Borstal? How does Colin react to them and how do his reactions more clearly define his character? (Note the introduction of characters in the film who do not appear in the written story; why have they been written into the film script?) Have there been any significant changes in the make-up of secondary characters in the script, changes in the film vastly different from the story version? Are these changes significant? Are they valid?

E. *Thematic statement.* No worthwhile art form has its message emblazoned in letters three feet high. But certainly Sillitoe has developed Colin to stand for something universal and to defy a universal enemy. What is the film "saying" through Colin?

The Book *(Signet, 60¢)*

A. *Narration.* How close do we get to the innards of Colin? How effective is narration in the first person? Are there things which might have been revealed if the narrator instead were a sympathetic, close friend? Is something lost in the telling because Colin is a modest sort? Is Colin a reliable narrator, and can we believe him? Is the written-version Colin a more sympathetic or a less sympathetic protagonist than is his film counterpart? Explain.

B. *Plotting.* What is the line of action? Is the strategy of plotting different from that of the film version? Are there flashbacks introduced into the story in any logical pattern or order? What proportions are assigned to key episodes? (How much, for example, on the robbery, the death of Colin's dad, the life at the Borstal, the race itself?) Is the plotting of events in the story similar to the plotting in the film?

C. *Settings.* Which settings are most vivid for you? Why? Can you cite particularly effective descriptive scenes? Why does so much of the story's setting evolve from the wide expanse of the runner's course? What juxtapositions of key scenes do you remember? Why do these occur in contrasting and/or parallel sequence?

D. *Use of secondary characters.* Why does the story operate with a minimal cast of characters? Is the use of few characters mandated by the story-form itself, where characters cannot easily be described, introduced and set into motion simultaneously? Would we lose rapport with the narrator Colin if we had to operate with as many secondary characters as we do in the film? Who are the secondary characters in the story? How does Colin react to each one of them? How do his reactions further help to define his character?

E. *Thematic statement.* Again, has Colin been fleshed and developed fully enough to stand for something universal, more than a runner in rebellion? Is his defiance plausible and admirable? His courage? Is his decision in the story as heroic as it is in the film? Are the dice more loaded in the story so that his decision is inevitable? Is there sufficient tension and suspense in the story?